



# United States Air Force

## Air Force Materiel Command

Air Force Development Test Center, Office of Public Affairs

101 W. D Avenue, Suite 110, Eglin AFB, FL 32542-5498 Tel. (850) 882-3931



August 1996

FACT SHEET

## Sea Turtles in the Gulf

### Introduction

Eglin Air Force Base is the largest air force base in the free world, including 724 square miles of land area and about 130,000 square miles of controlled airspace overlying land and water. In this setting, Eglin conducts its primary mission of full-service air armament development through weapons system research, development, testing and evaluation; training; space operations; and base and range support. While fulfilling its mission, Eglin also manages its natural resources, acting as a steward to protect plants and animals for future generations.

Eglin lies in northwestern Florida adjacent to the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. A variety of tropical life makes its home in this gulf, including several sea turtles. These ocean-going reptiles spend nearly all of their lives at sea, venturing to land when it is time to nest. While species range in ocean waters worldwide, Florida waters and beaches provide critical habitat. All sea turtles found in Florida are considered threatened or endangered. Eglin's undeveloped shoreline is a nesting habitat for the loggerhead and green sea turtles.



*Green  
Chelonia  
mydas*



*Loggerhead  
Caretta caretta*

### Life in the Sea

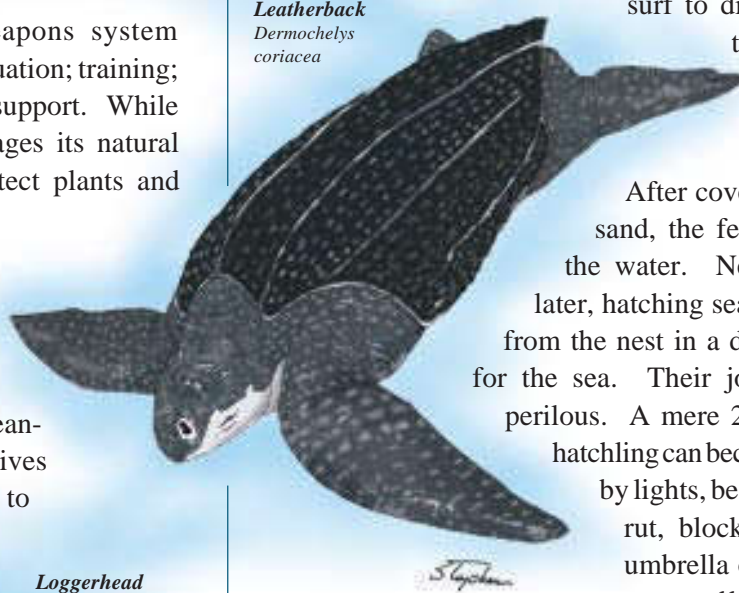
Sea turtles are well adapted to life at sea. With powerful front flippers, they move easily through the water in search of a variety of foods. Their diets vary by species, but include jellyfish, sea squirts, shellfish, algae, seagrasses and mollusks. During the nesting season, females return from their feeding grounds to nesting beaches. The trip may be as long as 3,100 miles.

Each summer, Florida beaches host a variety of nesting sea turtles. Almost always coming ashore at night, females struggle through the surf to dig sand pits for their eggs. Each female can lay 60 or more eggs.

After covering nests with sand, the females return to the water. Nearly 2 months later, hatching sea turtles emerge from the nest in a desperate search for the sea. Their journey is often perilous. A mere 2 inches long, a hatchling can become disoriented by lights, be trapped by a tire rut, blocked by a beach umbrella or a sand fence, or consumed by such predators

as raccoons, wild pigs, feral cats and ghost crabs. At sea, the hatchling must survive marine predators and potential threats from human activities. Manmade debris (such as plastics, tar balls and styrofoam) is sometimes ingested and can cause death. Mature sea turtles can also get trapped in shrimp nets. In some parts of the world, people continue to eat the eggs or kill the turtles for food, oil and leather.

As a result of habitat loss and human predation, many sea turtles are threatened or endangered.



*Leatherback  
Dermochelys  
coriacea*



## Sea Turtles in the Gulf of Mexico

Five sea turtles may be found in the Gulf of Mexico. Two species are known to nest on Eglin beaches, the Atlantic loggerhead turtle and the Atlantic green turtle. The nesting season for both species is from mid-May through August.




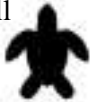

Natural resource managers at Eglin seek to increase sea turtle populations by increasing the number of hatchlings that reach the sea. This involves monitoring for nesting activity and minimizing possible threats to nests and hatchlings. As an example, nighttime mission activity requiring lights is carefully managed to minimize any disruptive effect on the turtles. Nests are screened to protect them from predators. If nests are threatened by imminent danger from tidal flooding or vehicle traffic, the eggs are relocated to safer areas. Natural resource managers from Eglin monitor sea turtle nesting on a daily basis along



*Nearly 80% of the sea turtle hatchlings at Eglin reach the sea.*

17 miles of beach on Santa Rosa Island. Specially trained volunteers also perform periodic surveys at Cape San Blas.

Once any nest has been identified, it is checked every other day until hatching begins, at which time daily monitoring occurs. Nearly 80 percent of the eggs deposited on Eglin beaches mature to hatchlings which reach the sea. With luck, mature females will survive the rigors of the sea and begin the process again.

<i>Sea Turtle</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Range</i>
Loggerhead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adult size ranges from 36 to 38 inches in length; 200 to 350 pounds</li> <li>- Heavy head and jaw</li> <li>- Feeds on mollusks, shellfish, jellyfish, and plants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Threatened</li> </ul>	Found in temperate and subtropical waters worldwide
Green 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Typical adult size is 39 inches in length; 330 pounds</li> <li>- Strictly herbivorous (plant-eating only) as adults</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Endangered on east coast of Florida and Pacific Coast of Mexico; threatened elsewhere</li> <li>- Eggs and meat eaten by humans</li> </ul>	Primarily in tropical waters of Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, Gulf of Mexico
Leatherback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Largest sea turtle, up to 6 feet in length; 1,300 pounds</li> <li>- Feeds chiefly on jellyfish</li> <li>- No hard shell</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Endangered</li> </ul>	Subpolar to tropical waters of Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, Gulf of Mexico
Hawksbill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Typical adult size 30 to 35 inches in length; 95 to 165 pounds</li> <li>- Feeds chiefly on sponges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Endangered</li> <li>- Source of commercial tortoiseshell</li> </ul>	Western Atlantic, from New England to Brazil
Kemps Ridley 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Typical adult size 23 to 27.5 inches in length; 80 to 100 pounds</li> <li>- Feeds on crustaceans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Endangered</li> </ul>	Chiefly Gulf of Mexico, but also along Atlantic Coast to New England and Nova Scotia